

## **Committee on Homelessness**

Report to Select Board

April 10, 2009

### **Historical Summary**

At the urging of Ken Mosakowski, the deceased long-time Town Meeting member, the Select Board established the Homeless Taskforce (the Taskforce) in 2006 to study the extent of homelessness in Amherst. In the Taskforce's majority and minority reports presented in June 2007, it was stated that there is sufficient anecdotal evidence of the presence of homeless individuals in Amherst to warrant the Town's attention. In September 2007 the Select Board unanimously voted to establish the Committee on Homelessness (the Committee) as a permanent Town committee.

The Committee is charged with making recommendations to the Select Board, the Amherst Housing Authority and the Community Preservation Act Committee on the manner to best address the problems associated with homelessness. The charge stipulates that two members of the Committee be either currently homeless or previously homeless and that the Committee make a progress report to the Select Board twice a year, once in March and once in September.

The Committee began to meet in November 2007 with a full complement of seven members. Three members resigned within the first few months due to illness or scheduling conflicts; the Committee was hence limited in its ability to produce results due to the repeated lack of a quorum to do business. When the Committee was able to achieve a quorum, it focused on setting up an emergency shelter in Amherst, and worked with its staff liaison, Mr. Rosenblatt, to find funds to put up homeless individuals in local motels on cold wintry days. In the winter of 2007 several homeless individuals were placed in motels as a result of the Committee's work.

### **Current Progress**

In October 2008, with a full compliment of seven members, the Committee began to meet at least twice a month and charged ahead to complete the following projects:

#### **1. Enhanced Single Room Occupancy Housing with Wraparound Social Service**

The Committee invited Domus Director Anne Lentinie, a successful housing advocate who championed the conversion of the Westfield Hotel into enhanced single room occupancy units and many other housing projects, to give a talk at the Committee's October meeting. The Committee paid a visit to two of her housing projects in Westfield. What most impressed the Committee were the on-site social services available, including a soup kitchen, a food pantry, police substation, and office space for social workers and nursing staff, and the network she built with local social service agencies such as Carlson Center, Department of Mental Health, along with others whom the tenants work with regularly.

## **2. Support for Homeless Services Provided by CHD and Eliot Homeless Services**

Homeless outreach workers are scheduled to brief the Committee quarterly on their progress responding to the needs of the homeless. The Committee is committed to supporting and assisting the outreach workers in reaching out to the homeless in Amherst. The Committee works with the Amherst Human Rights Director to ensure the rights of the homeless are protected and that the homeless are informed by outreach workers of their rights and of the ways to file a grievance.

The unfortunate death of Chris George did not go unnoticed by the Committee. Prior to his death, he was assisted by members of the Committee to ensure that temporary housing was provided in a timely fashion and that his human rights were respected by those who served him.

## **3. RFP for Feasibility Study for Providing Housing for Homeless Individuals**

Members of the Committee researched nearly a dozen social agencies that might have the institutional capacity to respond to the RFP for a homeless housing feasibility study. The Committee assisted Mr. Rosenblatt in finalizing the RFP and promoted its speedy submission by providing a list of agencies identified to be most appropriate.

## **4. Selecting Two Agencies for Feasibility**

The Committee reviewed the four submissions and chose two to invite for an interview. The Committee completed the interview and voted to divide the feasibility study work between the two agencies, Valley CDC and GrantsWorks. The Town can award the contract to only one respondent and therefore awarded the contract to the Valley Community Development Corporation. Valley CDC will however work with an appropriate agency to help with the identification of social services and property management.

## **5. Support for Request of \$450K from 2009 CDBG for Housing for Homeless**

In January 2009, the Committee attended a public hearing to lend its enthusiastic support for allocating \$450,000 from the 2009 CDBG grant to purchase properties to house homeless individuals. The Town will issue an RFP that will provide \$450,000 to an agency that submits the most favorable proposal to purchase and manage property to house homeless individuals and provide relevant on-site social services.

## **6. Distribution of Resource Guide for the Homeless—Short Version (see sample)**

The Committee designed a short version of a resource guide to help homeless individuals and others locate emergency food and shelter options in Amherst. One member donated funds to print several hundred copies of the guide. They have been distributed at Not Bread Alone, the Amherst Survival Center, along with other places where the homeless are known to frequent.

## **7. Distribution of Resource Guide for the Homeless—Long Version (see sample)**

Based on the resource guide designed by the Homelessness Taskforce, the Committee updated the guide with additional relevant information. The resource guide will be printed and distributed widely.

The Committee wishes to ask the Town to make this information available on the Town website and for printed copies to be placed in Town buildings, such as the Senior Center, Police Station, Fire Station, Jones Library, elementary schools, regional schools, and any other places deemed necessary.

## **8. Exploration of Establishing Emergency Shelter in Amherst**

The Committee is supporting CHD in an effort to establish emergency shelter at Jessie's House. The Committee is searching for other opportunities for housing homeless individuals in Amherst. The Zoning Board of Appeals did not approve of the use of Jessie's House for this purpose for this fiscal year. The Committee will continue to work with CHD to determine the viability of such a shelter and to assess the need for additional sheltering options.

Yvonne Frencerro, one of the founders of the Northampton Cot Shelter, and representatives from local churches, including the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst, Hope Church and the Jewish Community of Amherst, were invited to meetings to brainstorm with the Committee how best to establish an emergency shelter for this winter.

The ultimate problems faced by the Committee are twofold—the location and the administration of the cot shelter.

***The Committee on Homelessness wishes to thank Mr. Rosenblatt for his tireless effort assisting the Committee. Without his guidance, we would not have come this far.***

***Signed,***

Reikka Simula, Chair

Robert Ackermann

Hwei-Ling Greeney

Eric Magazu

Eleanor Manier-Gatti

Stanley Maron

Jonathan Nelms